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Analytical Paper

Freedom: Only for the Popular

Throughout history, the idea of courtship has been everchanging. The process of calling was the popular system of courtship in early America. This consisted of a couple meeting in the parlor of a woman's house, and was only warranted if the woman approved of the man. Women held most, if not all, of the power during courtship at this time. Calling then turned into the system of dating in modern America. Although this is what society sometimes calls the current process of courtship today, it was fairly different during the 1920's to the 1960's when it was at the height of its popularity. The differences between calling and dating were monumental due to the rise of cities and a shift in society as a whole. Couples were able to go on dates in the city to different locations such as the theatre, dance halls, and restaurants. They also were able to lose the chaperonage of a woman's family that was customary during the calling era. Thus, some scholars claim that the period from the 1920s through the mid-1960s was one of freedom for American youth. Although dating allowed for couples to escape the confines of a parlor, the system still remained restrained and held many expectations of the young people participating in it.

Courtship made its transition from calling to dating in around the 1920's. Dating became the popular system in society due to the upper class who could afford to go on elegant outings,

and the lower class who no longer had access to parlors that were previously required during calling. Thus, the rise in dating could be attributed to many shifts in societal culture and the economy. Automobiles assisted in couples being able to travel farther distances much more easily than before, and cities began to rise up. Women also wanted to be apart of the public sphere which is where men originally ran dominant. Women were leaving the private sphere of their homes, and parlors, and were entering the workforce, and going to college. Many of these working women were not able to access parlors anymore due to living in the city with other women, and thus “fled the squalor, drabness, and crowdedness of their homes to seek amusement and intimacy elsewhere. And a good time increasingly became identified with public places and commercial amusements.” (Bailey 18) Due to this, these working class girls who were not making decent wages became reliant on the money of their male counterparts in order to go out on these dates.

Money had always been a part of courtship, as a poor man would not call upon a rich woman, but in dating, money entered directly into the relationship between man and women as the symbolic currency of exchange. From this new reliance on men to have money in order for women to go out on dates, the power dynamic naturally shifted. During calling, men used to be at the disposal of the women they were going after romantically and their interests. Men used to have to either be invited directly by the woman, her mother, or have a good recommendation put in for him by one of the women’s friends. During this rise of dating, however, this all changed. A new equation erupted, and it consisted of men’s attention plus their money was equal to women plus their sexuality. Men held all the power during the entirety of the dating system, even as it evolved over time due to their wallets. Although this allowed more freedom for men, it also held

women to the societal idea that they were required to repay men in sexual favors. Women who were not willing to comply were not viewed highly in the dating system. Yet the women who were known to sleep around were also viewed poorly. This remained a popular concept throughout the different eras of dating, and still remains popular today.

Overtime, dating shifted into the system known as rating dating. This system was not about marriage or love, but instead it held its focus on competition. The American youth were entirely devoted to becoming popular and maintaining that status, and they did this through rating and dating members of the opposite sex. The system was based on the number of dates someone had been on, and the more dates the better. Women would “rank” men based on their eligibility, which was entirely focused around material wealth. This system was clearly evolved from the earlier system of dating, as popularity requirements varied from men and women. To be popular, “men needed outward, material signs: an automobile, the right clothing, fraternity membership, money. Women’s popularity depended on building and maintaining a reputation for popularity.” (Bailey 26) What this meant was women had their focus on being seen in public with popular, rich, men in the right places.

Women wanted to be seen as if they were in high demand by multiple men. They would often request dates to be booked out weeks in advance to appear as if they were busier than they actually were. Despite how many dates the woman was actually going on, if she could make it appear as if men were after her heavily, it did not necessarily matter. Women would also cancel dates last minute even if they were booked extremely in advance in a further attempt to seem as if they were in high demand. These women would also spend a considerable amount of their earnings on beauty supplies and cosmetics in order to seem as attractive as possible to the rich

men they wanted to date. Thus, the rating dating system was entirely based on popularity, image, and reputation. The men who were not rich enough, and the women who were not desired enough, made it nowhere in young adult society when it came to dating and relationships.

These two systems of dating represent perfectly how the youth of America were not truly “free” when it came to relationships and romance in the early and mid 20th century. Courtship began from men being given limited to no power when it came to relationships, and women held the authority from having the calls being held at her house, she, or her family, allowed the date to happen, and the man was expected to comply by waiting until she requested to see him. From that, courtship evolved into a practice that involved the men’s public sphere instead of the women’s private sphere. Courtship now relied on men’s money and a women’s amount of “respectability” in order for the couple to be able to go to a decent theatre or restaurant. If the couple was not viewed highly enough by society, their outings were restricted to cheap restaurants and theatres. The rating dating system that followed became even more cut-throat for the young adults involved in it as it was solely a popularity competition. Men were expected to be able to contribute large sums of money and material wealth if they expected to date a respectable girl, and that girl was expected to be beautiful and be willing to give sexual favors. Scholars may argue that although couples no longer sat in parlors chaperoned by the parents of the woman a man was interested in, that meant that the young adults of America were now given unlimited amounts of freedom in order to date as freely and openly as they wished. In reality, 20th century America was heavily restricted in the sense that only those who were popular were able to express the most “freedom”. Even then, they could only date other people who were viewed highly. Otherwise, they would risk ruining their reputation.

Work Cited

Bailey, Beth L. *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*.
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